



Keeping Yourself and Your Kids Safe and Healthy in the Pandemic: Tips for Judges, Legal Professionals, and Court Personnel

Overview

Helping the kids that we serve stay safe and healthy can be a challenge under ordinary circumstances, but now with the health hazards of COVID-19, the sometimes-conflicting guidance around what is safe, and the stress associated with social distancing or not being able to socially distance, the challenge may feel insurmountable. The calming presence and steady influence that you provide to youth, their families, and your co-workers is the single most powerful antidote to the fears, frustrations, confusion, and grief caused by these uncertain times that can escalate into a meltdown or crisis.

To have that crucial positive influence, it's essential that you "put on your oxygen mask first" by monitoring how you are handling the stressors that we are all facing. This does not mean doing more than you are already doing; it means doing a careful "gut check," so that you can focus on your job and those you serve while knowing that you've covered all your personal bases (or have a plan to do so).

Questions to ask yourself about your work role(s):

- What are you doing to contribute to your own and your colleagues' safety? If you're unsure because you can't always do tele-meetings, or avoid close contact with people, what's your best plan?
- What are your two or three main goals for each work day, and how will you know when you've accomplished them – or when you've made some progress even if you can't make it all happen now?
- What are you doing to stay connected with the youth and adults you're supervising or representing? If that's not happening, what's your plan to re-connect with them as soon as possible?
- What support are you getting from your colleagues and your program? What do you need?
- What have you done today that's made a positive difference to someone or that has been a step toward accomplishing an important goal? Every accomplishment, no matter how small, counts!
- What have you seen a colleague do today that you appreciated or admired? Did you tell them?
- What did you see a youth or caregiver do today that you appreciated or admired? Did you tell them?
- Who do you feel sad to have lost, or lost contact with, and how do you keep them in your thoughts?
- What support are you getting from your organization to help you balance work with a personal life?

Questions to ask yourself about your personal life:

- What are you doing to contribute to your family members' safety? If you're unsure, for example, because you can't be sure you're not bringing the virus home, what's your best plan?
- What is your main goal when you're with (a) your spouse/partner, (b) your child(ren), (c) your parents or other older adult family members – and how do you know when you're achieving it?
- What are you doing to have a sense of connection to your friends and other members of your personal support system, so that social distancing doesn't become emotional distancing?
- What did you see a family member do today that you appreciated or admired and did you tell them?

Basic Steps to Helping Youths Handle the Stress of the Pandemic¹

- 1 Create a Sense of Safety:**
Create psychological safety by showing youth that they can trust you to be there and to look out for them.
 - 2 Create Calm:**
By speaking and acting calmly yourself first, you can help youth calm themselves.
 - 3 Create Self and Collective Efficacy:**
Remind youth of their strengths, and build solutions to problems and challenges based on what the youth is already doing that is (or could be) positive.
 - 4 Create Connection:**
Stay in your role, but treat the youth as a co-team members whose ideas are valued, even if they need fine tuning.
 - 5 Create Hope:**
Be honest about the facts, and make realistic plans together (while still being clear that the buck stops with you).
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Do's and Don'ts for Working with Children and Families in a Pandemic

DO listen and help the youth/family member sort out their thoughts and feelings in a way that they feel is most helpful

DON'T offer generic reassurance or coping tactics, false hope or encouragement, or promises that you cannot fulfill

DO carefully assess for current or imminent major stressors, dangers, or other safety risks or sources of impairment

DON'T make assumptions about what's stressful or feels like a threat to the youth or family member, find out from them

DO learn about the specific ways the pandemic has affected their personal life and their personal relationships

DON'T overlook the importance of personal relationships and activities that may be negatively impacted or key supports

DO nonjudgmentally acknowledge distress as understandable in the circumstances and relate it to their core values

DON'T provide simplistic reassurance or advice, or attempt to convince them to feel or think differently

DO creatively build on their strengths, interests, and talents to brainstorm modified or alternative coping tactics

DON'T teach generic pre-packaged coping tactics that are not tailored to their personality, culture, and preferences

DO identify and reinforce positive ways they give to and receive from their support systems (including prosocial peers)

DON'T assume that their relationships are supportive or overlook areas of conflict or tension in their relationships

DO identify and reinforce ways they get support and are able to gain recognition in activities (including faith-based)

DON'T inadvertently limit their ability to draw on sources of positive support from people and activities

DO make sure they leave every conversation with you with one thought or tool that provides a sense of a way forward

DON'T treat any conversation with a youth or family member as pointless or worthless – that's a big missed opportunity

DO establish a practical way for them to make contact with you again, consistent with professional boundaries

DON'T ignore them because you're too busy or focused on someone else – check in with them whenever you can

DO use your stress management skills and support from co-workers, friends, and family to leave frustrations, worries, and other unfinished business at work with a commitment to deal with it when you return – and bring home the joys

DON'T talk the talk without walking the walk! Use the skills and strategies you use with youths for your own wellness



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¹ Hobfoll, S.E., et. al. (2007). Five essential elements of immediate and mid-term mass trauma intervention: Empirical evidence. *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes*, 70, 283-315.